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# Alienation, and its Antidote: Geographical Estrangement in the Modern Moment

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Alienation, and its Antidote:

Geographical Estrangement in the Modern Moment

On August 11th, 2016, the highest peak in South Dakota was renamed after years of debate. In an unanticipated and unanimous vote by the U.S. Board of Geographic Names, Harney Peak was renamed to Black Elk Peak (*Black Elk Peak*). The old name had been in use since



Photo of Black Elk Peak fire tower used to watch for forest fires in the mid-1900s. Photo from <http://harneypeakinfo.com>.

1855, when General William Harney led U.S. troops into numerous battles against Native Americans during the First Sioux War (Ellis). The board's vote surprised even supporters of the name change, one of whom called it an answer to prayer (Associated Press). "Place names serve

as a vehicle for identity,” says Juan Valdés of the National Geographic Society, an organization which informs decisions made by the Board of Geographic Names (Berlin). Harney Peak’s name change did receive great opposition, however, particularly from Senator John Thune. In response to the change, pointing to the “unnecessary expense and confusion” of the renaming and general dissatisfaction with the way the vote was carried out, Senator Thune ventured to say, “I suspect very few people know the history of either Harney or Black Elk” (Ellis).

Unfortunately, Thune’s view is not uncommon, and it’s born of a long American propensity for disregarding the connection between social and physical landscapes. Theorist Henri Lefebvre believed that “(social) space is a (social) product,” arguing that all conceptions of space are also reflections of social commitments (26). In the case of Black Elk Peak, arguments for the name change reflect a commitment to celebrating the life of Black Elk, a Lakota holy man, rather than that of General Harney. The name change is a social product, and the desire for it reveals relationships locals share with the physical space. Thune’s view, in light of Lefebvre’s theory, evidences the deliberate distance we’ve placed between geographic histories and current social realities. The stories we tell ourselves about our past determine the actions we take (or don’t take) in the present. In fact, alienation between ourselves and our environments has defined modern America, as reflected through cultural artifacts and texts. This is due to a combination of factors including the rising prominence of a service economy, burgeoning industrialization and technological advancements, and increasingly stratified connotations between the left and right as to what constitutes the American dream.

While the mid 1800s to early 1900s were defined in the United States by expansionism (Manifest Destiny), Western imperialism, and Reconstruction, the inception of the modern

period brought critical moments of reflection. Therein were born responses to the mistakes of the past, as seen in the Progressive and Conservation movements. Ultimately, although infrastructure expanded in an effort to modernize the nation—as seen in the rapid expansion of the railway system followed by expansion of roads—there remained a profound disconnect. The U.S. transitioned from westward expansion, in which Native Americans were systematically oppressed, to unhindered industrialization, and yet deeper needs were left unfulfilled. Americans felt alienated not only from each other, but also from their environments. From this, imbalances followed: societal unrest grew, entire groups were systematically disenfranchised, and the stories of the past went untold and unheard.

Antidotes to these issues have not gone unsought. In a chapter of his book, *Crossing Open Ground*, environmental author Barry Lopez offers one. He highlights the connections between internal and external landscapes, or inner states of mind and outward geographical features, respectively. Internal landscapes are a metaphorical reflection of the order contained within those external, and harmony between them creates a balanced state of mental health. Lopez illustrates the relationship between internal and external landscapes, and lays the groundwork for his theoretical claims, through storytelling. He shows by example that stories build intimacy between storytellers and listeners, holding the power to “nurture and heal” (69). Breaking particularly Occidental conceptions of truth as “something that can be explicitly stated,” Lopez argues for truth as rather “something alive and unpronounceable,” just like story. His work instills in readers a renewed sense of the connection between internal and external landscapes. Essentially, Lopez advocates for consideration of imbalances, whether personal, societal, or global, through the lens of landscapes. When internal landscapes fail to reflect the

“purpose and order” of external ones, imbalances and disorder result (65). Herein lies the reason why those with no concept of the sacred connection between internal and external landscapes are more prone to enact harmful and unsustainable practices on the very land which was their ancestors’ livelihood. Once land ceases to be one’s source of livelihood (a nod to industrialization and mechanization), the relationship between people and their physical environments irrevocably changes.

Not all human populations are equally guilty of this, however. Some have managed to keep the landscape at the center of their actions, values, and faith systems. The Oglala Lakota of South Dakota provide an example of such a perspective. Significant insight into Lakota traditions and history has been provided through John Neihardt’s narrative, *Black Elk Speaks*: a retelling of the early life of Nicholas Black Elk featuring stories from his youth. Recounting the prophetic visions and traumatic encounters with white settlers which characterized his life in the age of Manifest Destiny, as well as tales of traveling abroad as a Native American in imperial Europe, Black Elk’s narrative emblemizes the psychological impacts of coming of age in the midst of cultural genocide.

While *Black Elk Speaks* is narrated in the first person, Black Elk’s son had to translate his stories from Lakota into English for them to be culminated as a book. For this reason, John Neihardt is the technical author of the written piece, although the stories are not his own. This is an important admission given the way it blurs the lines of authorship and creates layers of narrative. By seeking out Black Elk and being granted the permission to carry out interviews and codify his stories, the final piece is less Neihardt’s work, the work of a person of European descent (a Wasichu), than it is the work of Black Elk, the storyteller himself. It is precisely this

wrestling with authorship—with determining the storyteller and the listener or, better said, the knowledge-holder and the knowledge-seeker—that parallels struggles for connectedness which characterized the U.S. at the turn of the century.

A version of this dynamic is best illustrated in the postscript of *Black Elk Speaks*. In it, Neihardt describes the group decision to hike to the top of Harney Peak as per Black Elk's request. They headed for Harney Peak, where Black Elk would pray to the Great Spirit for the restoration of his people. Black Elk notes, "if I have any power left, the thunder beings of the west should hear me when I send a voice, and there should be at least a little thunder and a little rain" (170). Black Elk is nearing the end of his life. His people are suffering after years of government-issued persecution and displacement. Neihardt foreshadows the unlikely events to follow, noting that "the sky remained clear until about the conclusion of our ceremony" (170). After Black Elk calls to the Great Spirit, the group watches as rain and thunder begin to develop, just as Black Elk had predicted.

This passage holds multiple striking implications. The first lies within the way that the party arrives to Harney Peak. According to a biography of Neihardt which discusses the trip, the group drove to the site but had to hike to reach the top of the over 7,000-foot landmark (Anderson 181). To this day, there are still no roads leading to the top of now Black Elk Peak. This points to an interesting contrast between old and new forms of transportation, between two totally different modes of being in and experiencing the world. Symbolically, it parallels the unique collaboration between Neihardt and Black Elk, who have lived vastly different realities yet are brought together for a particular purpose. Black Elk and Neihardt traveling by car as well as on foot to reach their destination serves as a fitting analogy for their joined work. The question

is not which of the two individuals gained more from collaborating with the other; what is more significant is that both had to understand and collaborate to achieve their individual aims. For better or worse, without Neihardt, Black Elk's story most likely would have extended to a limited audience. Conversely, without Black Elk, Neihardt would have had no story to tell. This is a perfect example of modern America: no individual can be propelled into the future without the insight and practical understandings of the past. The road Neihardt and Black Elk traveled likely would not have existed without certain footpaths that provided the basis of its route. Black Elk's dream of reaching the top of Harney Peak to pray once more for his people was facilitated by the automobile.

The mutually beneficial relationship between Black Elk and Neihardt shows that systemic injustice can be dismantled when involved parties open themselves up to storytelling. This is backed by more than naive optimism; Black Elk's story now has a platform due in part to the work of John Neihardt. Likewise, Neihardt can credit Black Elk for much of his success as a writer. Neihardt's quick assertion in reference to the rain and thunder on Harney Peak that "what happened is...related to Wasichu readers as being more or less striking coincidence" (170) limns an understanding between himself and Black Elk. Neihardt, while a Wasichu, did not believe the rain and thunder to be coincidental. He anticipates his audience's skepticism, using story to build trust and to convey what might otherwise seem incredible.

If the events at Harney Peak weren't merely coincidental, it reveals Black Elk's relationship with the landscape, defined by interdependence, balance, and wise use of resources. Determining the empirical possibility of what occurred on Harney Peak, however tempting, is irrelevant. Undeniably relevant are the relationships this moment reflects, not just between

Neihardt and Black Elk, but also between Black Elk and the surrounding land. For Black Elk, these relationships were all that remained “to repair a spirit in disarray” (Lopez 69).

Decades after Black Elk’s passing, one traveler would draw inspiration from his story while traveling the circumference of the United States in the 1970s. In *Blue Highways*, a narrative by William Least Heat-Moon about his experience traveling America’s backroads, Heat-Moon reflects upon heritage, nationhood, and the need for connection in a modernizing world. Anxious to experience the kind of healing through narratives that Lopez described, Heat-Moon listens to the stories of Americans from different walks of life, striving to determine what defines modern American society and, moreover, what defines him as a member within it. Having lost his job and his wife, Heat-Moon’s primary question becomes: when we feel alienated from ourselves and our surroundings, how can we become re-grounded? As such, he resolves to go in search of an answer. “With a nearly desperate sense of isolation and a growing suspicion that I lived in an *alien* land, I took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected” (emphasis added, 5). The explorer recognizes his estrangement from things inside and outside of himself. As such, his departure for the journey ahead is a well-intended escape; it is flight with purpose, disentanglement from old realities with the hope of catching a glimpse of the new.

Even before his departure, Heat-Moon shows promising awareness of his relationship with external landscapes. Lopez asserts, “One learns a landscape not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships between them” (64). Heat-Moon compares himself to and connects with the surrounding environment, using social and physical landscapes as a metaphor for deeper realities. He pays visits to small towns in Kentucky like



Shelbyville, Frankfort, and Brooklyn Bridge. He spends an evening in Nameless, Tennessee, where he meets the Watts family. Although Heat-Moon initially stops simply to learn more about how Nameless got its name, the Watts's quickly welcome him in, serve him a multi-course meal, give him a historian's account of the region, and play music for him from an old phonograph. Here, Heat-Moon makes a mental note: "It was one of those moments that you know at the time will stay with you to the grave...I thought: it is for this I have come" (33). What, however, is Heat-Moon's "this?" Purposely elusive, he makes readers decide for themselves—or, perhaps, to wait until later for clarification. Strong evidence for the latter emerges when Heat-Moon details his encounter later on with a young Native American medical student in Cedar City, Utah.

They meet in a college cafeteria. After Heat-Moon asks the student, Kendrick Fritz, whether he's Hopi or Navajo, the two quickly enter into a conversation about relationships between Anglo, Hopi, and Navajo people in the region, which soon lends itself to a discussion about identity. Picking up on Heat-Moon's desire to learn more about what defines the Hopi, Fritz vaguely offers to show him part of the "old Hopi Way" (184). Heat-Moon finds himself in Fritz's dorm room with a grayish, chalky substance in his hand. It's piki, a traditional Hopi bread-like food made from blue-corn flour and greasewood and sagebrush ashes. After trying some of the piki, Heat-Moon observes its delicacy as he lays a piece of it over Fritz's chemistry book, noting how "the words showed through" (184).

This moment is profoundly symbolic: Heat-Moon's simple observation of how the words beneath the piki are still visible parallels unity between the ancient and the modern. It reveals the way in which Fritz, as a student of modern medicine who still maintains his heritage, represents a harmonious spirit. Heat-Moon assumes the difficulty of carrying his "Hopi heritage into a world

as technological as medicine is,” but Fritz responds simply, “my heritage is the Hopi Way, and that’s a way of the spirit. Spirit can go anywhere. In fact, it has to go places so it can change and emerge like in the migrations” (187). Rather than viewing his heritage and aspirations in a modern context as separate, he chooses to understand himself more holistically (harmoniously). He chooses to see the world through the lens of his cultural heritage, compromising neither, and carrying his spirit with him everywhere. In this way, his work and efforts always go back to his people, back to “being responsible to [his] people” (182). Although his spirit isn’t contained within apparent borders, Fritz does mention that he intends to return to his hometown of Tuba City, Arizona. He tells Heat-Moon: “our land really is our Sacred Circle” (182).

This chance meeting allowed Heat-Moon to understand more of himself. His struggle to carry his spirit with him defined his trip at the beginning, but as he travels, he learns more about his own identity through listening to the stories of others. He finds healing in the interconnectedness of people, stories, and geographies. Ultimately, Heat-Moon’s road trip follows a search for the Black Elk and Barry Lopez versions of harmony: for positive, sustained relationships between external and internal landscapes, which generate healthy relationships within those respective landscapes, as well. He rejects the identity of the “man who makes peace with the new by destroying the old” (4). The trip, however uncertain and frightening, is Heat-Moon’s deliberate act of resistance against loneliness, desperation, and, most provocatively, alienation.

This fact illustrates a fascinating modern phenomenon, which is that Americans have gone from traveling out of the necessity to move to moving out of the necessity to travel. In search of a solution for our alienation, we have turned to the very thing that caused it: mobility.

This paradox reveals that we are ultimately and irreducibly reliant upon our external landscapes, such that even after creating divisions between ourselves and our environments, when our human-made environments fail us, we still escape to the land in search of healing. As Tim Cresswell states in his book *On the Move*, “mobility is just as spatial—as geographical—and just as central to the human experience of the world, as place” (3).

All landscapes emanate stories. All of them are rich with historical, narrative-based, and cultural insights. The physical geographies which surround us are palimpsests of our storied past, and they provide steadfast answers to culture’s confused and ever-changing questions. They don’t just tell our stories, they are our stories. With this understanding, the renaming of Harney Peak takes on new meaning. Toward the end of his life, Black Elk prayed for his people to “find the good red road and the shielding tree” (Neihardt 170). Commenting on his surprise over the name change from Harney to Black Elk Peak, Basil Brave Heart, a member of the same tribe as Black Elk, said “behind the shock is a prayer answered” (Associated Press). The 2016 renaming was a step, however small, in the direction of restoration: of antidotes to alienation.

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